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What are the prayers of the saints in Revelation 5:8?

Question: "What are the prayers of the saints in Revelation 5:8?"

Answer: The scene in [Revelation 5](#) is John's vision of heaven's throne room. When the Lamb had taken the scroll of God's judgment into His own hand, "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people" (verse 8). [Revelation](#) is the most symbolic book in the Bible, and in this passage the "prayers of the saints" are symbolized as golden bowls of incense, held by twenty-four elders. Of course, the more symbolic something is, the more its interpretations can vary, but it's important to understand what these prayers of the saints are—and what they are not.

God established incense as a part of the sacerdotal system (and therefore as symbolism) in [Exodus 30:1-10](#) when Moses was told to build the [altar of incense](#). The prayers of the saints in [Revelation 5:8](#), especially as represented by *incense* in the context of temple imagery, should be understood to take the *role* of incense in the temple, which was to offer up a sweet

aroma to God and to symbolize prayer. The prayers of the righteous are pleasing to Him. [Psalm 141:2](#) describes this aspect of prayer perfectly: “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice” ([Psalm 141:2](#)).

Prayer is linked to the incense in the temple in other passages, as well. When Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple and tells him that his prayers have been answered, Gabriel is “standing at the right side of the altar of incense” ([Luke 1:11](#)). This happened when “the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense” (verse 10).

There are certainly different [types of prayers](#). Prayers of supplication are the type most people are familiar with, because that’s the type where we ask God for help! But there are other types, too, like the prayers of imprecation ([Psalm 55:1:15](#)) and prayers of intercession ([Luke 23:34](#)). The fact that the “prayers of the saints” in [Revelation 5:8](#) are not identified by type or in detail—and that they are together in an incense bowl—indicates that we should consider them collectively. God considers prayer-at-large as incense—a sweet aroma to Him.

The fact that these are prayers “of the saints” in [Revelation 5:8](#) indicates that God hears the prayers of His people. [Psalm 65:2](#) addresses God as “You who answer prayer.” Our Lord “hears the prayer of the righteous” ([Proverbs 15:29](#)), which is another way of saying that He listens to the prayers of the saints. The “saints” in [Revelation 5:8](#) are not an elite class of people who are more holy than the rest; they are not mediators of our prayers (see [1 Timothy 2:5](#)), and they do not ask us to pray to them. The term *saint* in Scripture implies parity, not hierarchy. We are all one in Christ ([Galatians 3:28](#)). The saints are all believers in Jesus, living or dead, saved by grace through faith. The church is “loved by God and called to be saints” ([Romans 1:7, ESV](#)), and, when we pray, it’s as if a golden bowl of incense is being carried to the very throne of God in heaven.

Whom are these prayers of the saints *for* in [Revelation 5:8](#)? Since these prayers are the aggregate of all believers’ prayers through all time, they are about everybody and about everything that is consistent with God’s will. If you pray for somebody’s salvation, that prayer is in the bowl. If you pray for the safety and relief of people after a natural disaster, that prayer is in the bowl. If you pray that God would conform you into the image of Jesus Christ, that prayer is in the bowl. Such prayers are well-pleasing to Him.

Does [Revelation 5:8](#) lend credence to the tradition of [praying for the dead](#)? Not at all. The dead have already sealed their

rate, for good or for evil (see [Luke 16:19-31](#)). There is no post-mortem plan of salvation. Now is the day of salvation ([1 Corinthians 6:2](#)). After death, a person faces judgment, not further opportunity ([Hebrews 9:27](#)). So, if you pray that God would save or relieve someone who has already died, that prayer would *not* be in the bowl. Such prayers are futile.

In [Revelation 5](#), God's plan is near to being accomplished. The judgment of the wicked world is about to commence, and the ultimate redemption of God's people is about to be realized. The living creatures and elders sing a hymn of praise to the Lamb: "With your blood you purchased for God / persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. / You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, / and they will reign on the earth" ([Revelation 5:9-10](#)). The golden vessels full of incense are proffered to God, whose word will stand, whose will is accomplished, and who will pronounce the final "Amen!" to the prayers of the saints.

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